

Derek Wallbank, *MinnPost*

WASHINGTON - It has been a year and almost two months now since Rep. Betty McCollum introduced a bill aimed at preventing child marriage partially through the United States simply saying it exists.

If the bill is to pass this session, now is the time for it to move. And it's no coincidence that McCollum and her allies have launched their biggest push yet to get it done.

"Beyond violating a girl's most basic human rights, child marriage causes myriad negative educational, social and health consequences," McCollum wrote in a joint op-ed with Rep. Ander Crenshaw that was published in Roll Call today. "The physical ramifications resulting from girls being forced to marry and engage in sex with adult men are obvious."

Child brides are at a higher risk of domestic violence, sexually-transmitted diseases and, of course, pregnancy. In addition, McCollum and Crenshaw noted, the marriages undermine U.S. assistance in countries like Afghanistan and Yemen because married girls often miss out on U.S.-backed aid like schools.

"Young women and girls cannot attend a school built with U.S. assistance or access critical health information and services if she is married against her will," they wrote.

Kakenya Ntaiya, a Kenyan Masai woman who is now studying in the United States, spoke at a Human Rights Commission hearing last week where she told lawmakers she was engaged at age five, pledged to be married at puberty and "constantly reminded" during her childhood "that my husband was waiting."

Ntaiya was one of the lucky ones who was able to convince her parents that she needed be educated instead. She has now founded a girls school in her home village.

McCollum's bill would require that the State Department's annual human rights report note the

prevalence of child marriage in a given country and would be coupled with a foreign policy strategy to work on eradicating it. So far, however, it hasn't moved out of committee.

McCollum's bill has attracted 103 cosponsors, including Keith Ellison, Jim Oberstar and Tim Walz. A Senate companion bill has been introduced, but hasn't yet been moved in committee.

The letter, coupled with the hearing, are part of a push by McCollum and others to un-stick the legislation.

Part of that delay has been the clogged legislative calendar - the stimulus, cap-and-trade in the House, health care reform, Wall Street reform, things like that. With those now out of the way and the legislative calendar relatively open, McCollum and her allies have found a window in which to push hard for passage.

"Young girls and teenagers are not commodities to be sold or traded into marriage," McCollum and Crenshaw wrote. "We can stop this practice and ensure that girls have the opportunity to develop, grow and contribute their skills to strengthening families, communities and entire countries."

"Congress should act quickly to pass this legislation and give millions of girls worldwide a chance to be girls, not wives."